Where Is the Father?

Luke15:10–32

February 12, 2017

The story of the prodigal son is one of the most familiar and beloved of Jesus' parables. It tells of the father who, day after day, stood watching at the edge of his property, anxiously awaiting the return of his wayward son who had squandered his inheritance. It speaks of the son, who in utter ruin finally remembered his father, returned home, and begged for forgiveness. This parable has often been used as a sermon text to depict the God who continually waits for sinners to repent and the sinner who humbly turns back. It has touched Christian hearts with both comfort and encouragement.

Yet, as a preacher, I have long felt discomfort whenever this story was used in evangelistic sermons. To us Gentiles—especially to the Japanese—it sounds like a tale foreign to our own experience, and therefore unsuitable as a message of evangelism. Jesus crafted this parable specifically for Israelites of two thousand years ago, weaving into it their religious sense, their awareness of God, and their cultural customs.

For that very reason, when the same parable is presented unchanged to modern Japanese people—whose religious awareness and cultural framework are entirely different—it cannot achieve the same effect. Personally, I first read it only after becoming a Christian and gaining some understanding of theology. That allowed me to appreciate and be moved by the story. But for ordinary Japanese, I believe it is extremely difficult to grasp. To communicate it effectively requires special consideration.

I. No Memory of Leaving the Father

In Jesus' parable, the younger son abandoned his father, an act of selfish rebellion. For the Israelites, this was a fitting analogy: though they had been clearly shown the Creator God, they forsook Him and turned to idolatry. As individuals and as a nation,

they had every reason to see themselves reflected in this parable. But Japanese people have no such memory.

Rather, the Japanese have long lived embraced by gentle nature, sensing dimly within it a great Presence, and looking up with gratitude and reverence. True, they may have treated this Presence lightly at times, but they never wholly rejected Him to pursue idolatry in the same sense.

II. No Memory of Ruin through Dissipation

Generally speaking, the Japanese people have lived with a sense of harmony and diligence. While only faintly aware of their Creator, they still revered Him, never fully straying from Him nor seeking to depict Him in idols.

On the contrary, they have felt His blessing everywhere—in festivals, in nature's bounty—and built rich lives of gratitude. Natural disasters, wars, and misfortunes came, yet looking at the sweep of history, Japan as a whole enjoyed peace and prosperity, living with thankful hearts.

III. No Consciousness of Returning to the Father

When Japanese feel shame, error, or sin, they may withdraw into seclusion or enter the Buddhist priesthood. This reflects a desire to renounce privilege or practice self-denial. But the thought of returning to a father is foreign. An adult man, defeated by failure, would not crawl back to his father in tears. A child might, but not a grown son. A Japanese man would rather strive on to the end; if he fails, he accepts death, leaving his bones to the hills and fields.

IV. No Father Who Waits for the Son

Of course, Japanese parents worry about their children, even those who have left home. But in Japanese culture, it is the mother—not the father—who waits. Therefore, some have said, "What the Japanese need is not God the Father, but God the Mother."

For Japanese men, if they were to return at life's end, it would be not to father or mother, nor to their community, but to their homeland—the familiar natural world of their birthplace. Hence the Japanese question: Who is this father? Where does he dwell?

V. Proclaiming the Gospel through Nature

The Japanese love nature. They see themselves as part of it. That is why many today desire their ashes to be scattered after death—an expression of returning to nature. In the mysterious beauty of nature, they sense a Presence beyond mystery and seek peace in it.

Through this mysterious nature, the Japanese sense faintly the One who created it, who gives life, preserves life, and sustains them. Thus, when they hear the story of the prodigal son, they may enjoy it as a tale but still feel, "Something is off." What matters is to gently point them to the One who made nature, who placed humans within it, and who speaks through it.

When Japanese clearly recognize the Creator of heaven and earth, they can also come to acknowledge the God of the Bible as God.

VI. Living in the Fullness of This One's Grace

Of course, it is good for Christians to be upright and academically excellent. But even more, let us live gratefully, brightly, and vibrantly, enjoying the blessings of creation. Let us listen for the voice of the One who gave us this great nature and still speaks through it, conversing with Him and praising Him. This is the life Jesus made possible for us by going to the cross—that we might receive God's blessing with open hearts.

Jesus knew well the culture and customs of His hearers. He spoke truth in ways that were most accessible to them. If we merely repeat His parables unchanged to the Japanese, the gospel will not be conveyed. We must grasp the essence of His gospel and retell His teaching in ways that are clear and acceptable to Japanese people.

In fact, within the parable of the prodigal son lies an image of God that resonates deeply with Japanese hearts: the God who runs to embrace the returning son reflects the "Mother God" that many Japanese long for. To reach Japanese hearts, we may need to emphasize this maternal aspect of God. Let us then become Japanese Christians who live by, and live out, the gospel of Jesus.